

# THE RESEARCH COMMISSION ON POVERTY AND POLICY ADVOCACY

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## Summary Report

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## **Executive summary**

Child poverty is increasing in the UK. But how does that play out differently in the four UK jurisdictions, in relation to education? How do the different educational policy contexts and different educational structures affect the curriculum and pedagogy, and so what flexibility do they allow teachers, in engaging with children and young people who are growing up in poverty? This BERA Research Commission on Poverty and Policy Advocacy has provided a nuanced picture of variations across the UK in terms of educational responses to child poverty. It has brought together a network of practitioners and researchers to find new ways of thinking about the problem of child poverty and how educators can respond to it.

## Introduction

How are increasing levels of child poverty playing out in the four UK jurisdictions, in relation to education? How do the different educational policy contexts across the UK, and different educational structures, affect the curriculum and pedagogy across the four jurisdictions? What flexibility do they allow teachers, in engaging with children and young people in marginalised groups, including those who are growing up in poverty?

The starting point of this BERA Research Commission, which was led by Gabrielle Ivinson of Manchester Metropolitan University, is the fact that inequality is growing in the UK, with child poverty increasing as a result of government policy. Figures from bodies such as the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission show that across each UK jurisdiction, child poverty is rising, and it is possible to see exactly the point at which child poverty went from being incrementally reduced year on year, to beginning to grow. Following the financial crash of 2008, the UK Government introduced some tax benefits that protected families and from the worst effects of the economic downturn. From 2013 onwards, the impact of Government austerity removed some of these benefits and child poverty has been rising.

The situation throughout the UK jurisdictions is that although education has long been a devolved power in Scotland, and has been in Wales since devolution in 1999 and in Northern Ireland since the Northern Ireland Assembly was established in 1998, their tax-raising powers are limited or do not exist. This means that they are limited in terms of spending, and they cannot redress the wider economic trends set by the Westminster government. This is the context of the Research Commission's work.

There is clear evidence that poverty has an effect on educational attainment. Yet the picture across the UK is not uniform in this respect. Despite the limitations on their powers, across the UK jurisdictions there is still flexibility in curriculum and pedagogy, enabling teachers, to different degrees, to connect with the life-worlds of marginalised groups. That is except in England, which is to some degree the outlier. Importantly, recent curriculum reforms in England have restricted what is understood by knowledge, i.e. what schools are expected to teach, and that restriction has disproportionately affected marginalised groups – groups whose cultures, ethnic backgrounds, class or gender mean that they have been given the least support in accessing academic knowledge. This includes children and young people who are growing up in poverty.

The question that this BERA Research Commission asked was: given a background of increasing child poverty, how is this playing out differently in the four UK jurisdictions? Researchers have long known about trends in child poverty: in short, child poverty had been gradually decreasing across the jurisdictions, but since 2013 this trend was reversed in all four jurisdictions. However, there are differences in the ways that schools can respond,

because of the different policy contexts and the different political ideologies at play. Furthermore, the school systems are different across the jurisdictions, and this feeds through into the different degrees of flexibility that teachers have in making meaningful connections between academic knowledge and the life-worlds and experiences of children and young people living in poverty.

By paying attention to the differences between jurisdictions, and providing a more nuanced picture across the UK, it is possible to see that there is a range of options available for schools to respond to child poverty. This Research Commission makes the argument, though, that educators cannot ultimately compensate for the social policies that have an effect outside of school, and therefore cannot make up for policies of austerity. Indeed, this Research Commission became aware of the extent to which schools are having to pick up the tab of the cuts relating to austerity.

## **The work of the Research Commission on Poverty and Policy Advocacy**

This Research Commission proceeded by organising seminars in all four UK jurisdictions (in Glasgow, Belfast, Cardiff, and two in England – in Leeds and Oxford – to capture differences between the North and the South). These seminars collected evidence from practitioners, policymakers and academics who work on poverty, education and schooling.

The locations were chosen partly because these are places where there are academics who are already working on child poverty. Some members of the research community created by this Research Commission have worked together in the past, while others were brought together for the first time through their specialist interest in education and poverty. Locations were chosen also because the academics who live in those places have developed relationships over long periods of time with Local Authorities, with schools and with teachers. Each seminar brought together people from these different fields.

The methodology of the seminars was carefully designed as a combination of the top-down and the bottom-up, eliciting information to enable cross-jurisdiction comparisons to be made, but also providing an opportunity for attendees to raise issues that they consider to be important, and thus allowing themes to emerge. This was important for the Research Commission: if policy is considered simply at the level of the policymaker (by looking at the White Papers that are published, for example), other views can be excluded: especially the views of other groups, who are differently positioned in society, and who may have different priorities and different constraints. By going to particular areas and talking to the Local Authorities and teachers in those places, and where possible parents and young people themselves, this Research Commission aimed to represent more than just one level of understanding. The methodology was intended to take context seriously: in some respects it is the opposite of a scientific approach which filters out the contingent and the variable. Its focus was on how overarching policy plays out in particular locations, and how it affects the lived experience of children and young people living in poverty.

This Research Commission was also concerned to hear the voices of young people themselves, and a Community Forum was held in a community school in Manchester to this end. Recognising that young people sometimes find it difficult to take part in such events, the Research Commission worked over several months prior to the Community Forum, organising workshops that were held in three secondary schools and one primary school in areas of Manchester with low socio-economic status, and with a diverse ethnic mix. By taking part in the workshops, young people were given help in articulating their concerns.

## Emerging findings

The findings of this Research Commission show how the school systems in the four UK jurisdictions vary in their ability to respond to child poverty. This is knowledge that is securely held in each jurisdiction, and in many cases it is not new. What is important is the comparative element, which has tended to be obscured in the past because of the dominance of England in academia in general.

**England** is in many respects the outlier: in England the state has greater direct control of curriculum and pedagogy than in any of the other jurisdictions. Within England the picture is very much a fragmented one in terms of how schools attempt to deal with child poverty. In the past, schools were able, to some extent, to work with social services, with the criminal justice system or with charities – the school could bring those groups together through Local Authority structures, to support young people living in poverty. But this is now much harder than it once was. What happens now is that academy-type schools have to find the support and resources to deal with complex issues relating to child poverty that previously would have been directed to them through their Local Authorities. Many of these schools are now having to commission support for themselves, and as they do so they are reaching out to the many hybrid groups who are emerging in the space opened up by the marketisation of education.

The Government has stimulated the market, believing that the more schools can commission their own support, the better the deals that will be made. But what this Research Commission has found is that those who previously held the knowledge about how to help marginalised groups have either been disbanded or starved of money. There is a real problem now with expertise: who can a school call upon, for example, to understand why a pupil is being disruptive? In the past, they would have called upon specific people with specific expertise. The system now is much more fractured, and in general the pupils who are not being catered for adequately are those who require specialist expertise. The contracting-out of Local Authorities educational services accelerated with the Coalition Government of 2010: there is a question now as to whether some of these services need to be brought back in-house.

The distinguishing feature of the situation in **Scotland** is the fact that the education profession still has ownership of curriculum and pedagogy. There are intermediaries between schools and the State, which are recognised as professional bodies, and which still have a strong understanding of teachers and related professionals – bodies such as the General Teaching Council of Scotland, for example. At the same time, Local Authorities still have significant control in making sure that there are enough schools, enough teachers, and enough places for pupils. The system in Scotland is not fragmented, in other words. And because the curriculum is not legislated by the state, it is a system in which professionals are

still trusted to do their jobs. Scotland has not seen the major swings from radical to conservative educational approaches and back again: as a result it still has structures that have retained the confidence of politicians and the people.

This all plays out in the way that educators can deal with child poverty: it means that they have a whole infrastructure in place to support them. The Scottish government has also recently introduced specific policies for tackling child poverty: policies that are aimed not just at helping schools, but families also – they recognise that poverty cannot be solved by the school alone. Theirs is a joined-up, multi-agency way of working, supported by a politics that is much more ideologically underpinned by the notion of social justice, rather than the free market.

The system in **Wales** is the most radical at the moment. At the time of devolution, the Welsh education minister had attempted to create a distinctive education system with ‘clear red water’ between Cardiff and Westminster: this was captured in a seminal document called ‘The Learning Country’. The main part of this system to have survived is the Early Years curriculum, which is radical, well researched and well thought-through. However, heightened political publicity around the PISA league tables led to the Welsh system increasingly aping what was happening in England, with an increasing concentration on literacy and numeracy, for example. Now there is a third wave, with a very radical new curriculum that is being developed bottom-up, starting with the teachers on the ground, and guided by the Donaldson Review (2015).

Potentially this enables teachers to address the issues that marginal groups of young people have. Yet work in developing the new curriculum is on-going, and we still do not know how financial resources will support the system. Potentially it could provide teachers with the kinds of curricula and pedagogic flexibility that are required to support children and young people living with post-industrial poverty: it is being closely watched.

**Northern Ireland** (NI) has a complex educational system, with a statutory curriculum which is somewhat similar in structure to that in England and Wales, but which has progressively diverged since 2007. However, NI suffers from longstanding educational inequality, with sectarian problems being the real bugbear of the NI system. Historically, Northern Ireland has the most divided education system: not only are there largely Catholic (Maintained), Protestant (Controlled) schools and integrated schools, but also grammar and secondary modern schools with academic selection at age 11. Annually NI has some of the best results in high-stakes tests in the UK. However, when it comes to those who do achieve poorly, NI has some of the worst results, with the proportion of young people leaving with few or no qualifications largely unchanged for the last decade. And this is doubled among those young people who are entitled to Free School Meals (FSM). Although there is a raft of Government policies that aim to contribute to a reduction in the attainment gap between those children

who are poor and those who are from wealthier homes, the attainment gap persists. Problems relating to social class and religion are endemic in the system, and until the current political stalemate is resolved and there is the political will to change the system, working class Protestant boys, in particular, are likely to continue to do much worse educationally than others.

### Policy practice themes

As well as providing a comparative picture of the four UK jurisdictions in terms of responses to child poverty, the following six themes have emerged from the Research Commission's seminars and Community Forum as being particularly important in this regard:

- First, it can be argued that Britain is increasingly a **divided nation**. The rise of child poverty, and the divide between those who have and have not, in a sense is outside of education, but the context is hugely important. The picture is one of increasing disparities, which can be mapped across the different annual State of the Nation reports from the Commission for Social Mobility and Child Poverty. Within those reports there is detailed information about household income for example, and also about educational attainment.
- In terms of **definitions of poverty**, what is often used are the Treasury's equations of absolute and relative poverty, which are based on household income. Part of the Research Commission's work, however, has been to consider more social science-based ways of looking at poverty, which challenge the idea that poverty can be measured just through household income. Children in a wealthy house can still be starved of what they need, with no control over their own lives: household income is a crude measure of poverty. And while schools tend to use free school meals as a proxy measure, this also is a poor one: we know that many families who live in poverty will avoid the stigma of claiming free school meals. The education sector needs to work with the more nuanced definitions of poverty that are available in the social sciences, such as those outlined, for example, by Danny Dorling and Tess Ridge.
- As for **poverty trends**, the pattern is clear: up until 2013, levels of child poverty were decreasing incrementally across each jurisdiction, partly as a result of declaration by then Labour Government in 2001 that set the goal of eliminating child poverty by 2020 and the mechanisms around it enshrined in the Child Poverty Act of 2010: not only did the Act enshrine the pledge into law,, but each jurisdiction had to present an annual paper to its Assembly or Parliament, using the measures that had been devised by the Treasury, to demonstrate how far they had progressed towards reaching that goal. But in 2015/6, when the UK moved from the Conservative/



Liberal Democrat Coalition to a solely Conservative government, 'child poverty' was removed from the remit and title of the Commission for Social Mobility, and there was no longer the requirement to report figures specifically on child poverty, and there is now no body that is responsible for doing so. At the same time, there have been increasing attempts to define poverty not in terms of family income, but in terms of other factors such as involvement with criminal justice, or educational attainment: we are seeing a clustering of factors together. These major changes were taking place just as this Research Commission was holding its seminars.

- The **lived experience** of children and young people living in poverty is often not sufficiently understood, or recognised. Work that gets at the fine-grained experience of poverty needs to be more widely known: there is some excellent research, for example, which uses ethnographic data to show that children in poverty suffer because of the stigma attached to not having the right uniforms or equipment, or not being able to pay for school trips.
- In terms of the relationship between **gender, educational underachievement and disadvantage**, there is still a strong need to recognise the ways in which social structures and social organisations are still to some extent patriarchal. The labour of caring, for example, which is often carried out by women, is still often overlooked and yet it is hugely important for children. In terms of poverty, the focus needs to expand beyond current measures to consider the needs of young people and children. For example, rather than stigmatising a single mother with no job who is struggling to bring up her children, better measures could help us get beyond neoliberal and individualising discourses of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.
- Finally, there is the need to bring back critical and informed debate about **curriculum diversity**. Public and policy understandings of curriculum and pedagogy are at an all time low in the UK, eclipsed by government control over narrowly defined 'age and stage' representations of curricular especially in England. A crucial question is whether narrowly defined subject knowledge can be taught in ways that enable children living in poverty to recognise themselves as legitimate knowers. Curricula are different across each jurisdiction: some give teachers a greater chance of engaging with the cultural reference points that marginalised groups have. Wales could be at the forefront in this regard: Welsh teachers will very likely be able to develop the curriculum to recognise the life-world of people living with generations of worklessness in the Welsh valleys, for example. In Scotland, again, teachers are empowered: good teachers who know the local area, and who are aware of local issues, can engage with children living in poverty. This is so much more difficult in England, however. Teachers in England may see that children in poverty need additional support, yet they are driven by an academic curriculum that tends to

organise knowledge into stage- and level-based expectations strongly informed by inflexible assessment structures and judgements of teachers' work. In some schools, teachers' pay can even be dependent on getting children through exams. Once the teaching profession becomes controlled and regulated to this extent, they can find it difficult to speak out. This emerged clearly through this Research Commission's seminars: whereas in Wales teachers were able to talk about inequality without fearing for their jobs, in England it was much more difficult. There is a need for further research to understand more fully how and why management structures in some schools in England have cowed the teaching profession and prevented teachers from being able to speak about the effects of child poverty as they experience it.

## **Recommendations**

The Research Commission concludes by making a series of recommendations to BERA, to continue this work on education and child poverty:

1. BERA should organise and host a major public conference, in order to articulate the problem of poverty and education, in a clear and well-evidenced way.
2. BERA should commission a literature review of poverty and policy advocacy, looking especially at evidence of what works in terms of classroom interventions to help children and young people living in poverty.
3. BERA should endorse and support the pilot studies that have been developed from the Research Commission's work, studies which are looking especially at the knowledge gaps which can affect policy in this area.
4. BERA should include a policy officer and media officer in its office staff, to make educational research more widely beneficial.
5. BERA should develop a structure for organisational deputations, to help extend the reach of the educational research community.

## **Future and next steps**

The networks that this Research Commission has helped to establish are ongoing, and they continue to play the important role of such networks in holding together academic knowledge and policy understanding, and helping to bridge the gap between the academy and the life-worlds of people. This is a question of who holds knowledge: in the past, knowledge has tended to reside in different jurisdictions and different universities, but to understand policy problems in a more nuanced way, and create new ways of thinking about policy solutions, networks are essential. The network created by this Research Commission will continue to ask how we bring expertise from the academies together to resonate with the real-life experience of teachers, young people and families living in poverty, and have a dialogue with politicians, power-brokers and policy-makers.

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